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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of loss workshops in the classroom to address the needs of students experiencing grief from loss, as a result of death, divorce, relocation, or other severed relationships. The goals of the Loss program are briefly reviewed, i.e., to facilitate acceptance of loss, and to promote personal growth and mental health. Special problems in grieving should be addressed by a loss program in order that the program be effective. Specific problems resulting from a sibling's death and the family's protective manuevers are discussed as well as special problems associated with divorce. Loss workshops are described as a strategy by which counselors can help students and teachers accept and constructively live through a child's experience of loss. Workshop activities are presented to help participants face loss in their own lives, understand the emotional and behavioral dynamics of loss, and develop self-awareness and insight regarding meaningful relationships. Handouts to be used with students and teachers in the classroom are also included. (NRB)

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Using Developmental LOSS Workshops in the Classroom

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Using Developmental Loss Workshops in the Classroom

School children, from elementary years through high school, experience grief from loss. Loss may take many forms, including death of a relative or close friend, divorcing or separating parents, severed relationships from moving to a new location, and companionships which become unsatisfying. Loss may also take an uncommon form such as losing the "ideal: one has of a parent after continual disappointments, giving up a long-held goal, or death of a cherished pet. All forms of loss mean grief behaviors in children for school personnel to face and work with.

The goals of the Loss Program in the schools is two-fold. Short range goals focus on facilitating acceptance of loss by the involved young people and personal growth from its resolution. Specifically, the counselors work to stop the students' preoccupation with the loss and change the unhealthy modes of dealing with the anger, denial, and depression. Students are assisted back to responsibility for their academic requirements and effective daily living. Long range goals for the Loss Program promote personal mastery and mental health. Understanding the loss experience fully, finding its personal meaning leads to cognitive and affective competence. Counselors recognize the interdependence between intellectual and emotional development and aim to enhance these ends.

Research suggests that it is not the absence of problems and symptoms in childhood that prodicts adult mental health but rather the presence of various forms of competence and ego maturity. John Dewey noted that the real learning occurs when an active learner confronts

a difficulty or disequilibrium and then has an opportunity to reflect over that experience and extract meaning from it in order to guide future experience. If mental health means the widest possible range of choices for an individual in the ansence of internal and external constraints, facing a loss, leanring to understand, accept, and move ahead with a new perspective means increased options for attitudes and behaviors for young people. Counselors view grieving students as active learners and further their education through the Loss Program into cognitive and affective spheres.

To be effective a Loss Program must address special problems in grieving. First, the person must accept the fact that a loss has occurred. The break need not be clear-cut, such as a death, but may be the loss of an ideal, a friendship, or a pet. Next, the individual must realize that all feelings involved with the loss are natural and permissible. It is okay to feel anger, shame, fright, or relief over even "minor" losses. Finally, the person needs to complete unfinished business regarding the loss. Knowing that relationships do not last forever may mean fear of becoming involved in the future or, conversely, overdependency in a futile attempt to hold onto the present. Life may be greatly enriched through meaningful relationships but these are adjuncts to self-directed growth rather than alternatives to it.

Moreover, young people have certain problems in grieving which must be considered by a Loss Program. Krell and Rabkin (1979) speak of a family's protective maneuvers revolving aroung the death of a sibling. These behaviors may well reflect the actions apparent with any loss. Family members might form a conspiracy of silence, refusing

to speak of the loss openly, fearful that their guilt or latent responsibility for the loss will be uncovered. Unable to share these painful feelings, parents might not even mention the tragedy after the funeral (or move, job loss, etc.) The silence arouses anxiety and guilt in the confused children, allowing the youngsters to fantacize their worst fears about the experience.

Another strategy involves giving special status to the surviving child, overprotecting and shielding the living child from real and imagined dangers which might befall. Parents often develop expectations for the survivor based on the deceased's abilities not on those of the living child. Some parents may attribute the survivor's presence to "luck." rather than reality. They may withdraw emotionally from this child so as not to risk another painful loss. The messages to the surviving child from this attitude are confusing and destructive, especially in adolescence as the individual is trying to discover and establish a personal identity. The child may feel omnipotent and become reckless in actions, become frightened and dependent because they suspect that luck will stop, or experience the resentment and futility of trying to actualize characteristics which are not theirs and never pleasing their parents.

A thrid maneuver is to provide a substitution for the lost child by means of birth or adoption of a new child or by viewing the surviving child as heir to the deceased's attitbutes and goals. Again, parental expectations reflect the lost child and not the present one. The survivor then enters a no-win situation where he or she cannot develop according to his or her nature but rather by the script written by grieving, unaccepting parents.

Divorce brings another set of special problems for young people. If parnets are arguing bitterly, the child may unjustly feel responsibility for the conflict. After all, the parents are, at least superficially, fighting about the child. Underneath, they are fighting about their disintegrating relationship but the child does not hear this reality in the firey words. The young person may also feel the responsibility for keeping the family together. This youngster might then act as a peacemaker, become a superconscientious angel, or a destructive rebel, futilly searching for whatever means forces the alienated parents to work together to praise or save the child.

Once a divorce actually separates the parents physically into two households, the young person often faces unrealistic demands for allegiance to one or the other parent. The child is falsely told it is impossible to disloyal to continue loving both adults. With the arrival or stepparents, a different set of problems emerge. The new parent is generally to eager to assume a parental role for family maintenance, discipline, or togetherness without first allowing a relationship to develop with the young person. A stepparent who assumes too much too soon may have the social and legal right to act as parent but lack the legitimacy only the child can grant based on trust, respect, and understanding. The stepparent may not give the young person the much needed opportunity to grieve for the lost parent (even if the parent is only across town) or keep contact with the noncustodial parent. Sometimes this occurs with full support of the natural in-house parent. The child may then resentfully view the stepparent as an interloper and displacer and the natural parent as a betrayer. The child of divorce needs to keep the relationship

open with both natural parents through visits, talks, momentoes, and memories.

Dealing with loss is a difficult and painful process, and since young people bring their personal lives with them into school, the counselors must help these individuals and their teachers accept and constructively live through the experience. The following pages include handouts for workships with students and teachers in the classroom. The activities help the participants face loss in their own lives, understand the emotional and behavioral dynamics of loss, and develop self-awareness and insight regarding meaningful relationships, past, present, and future.

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LOSS: Developmental Workshop for Adolescents

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Activities

Day 1

1. Brainstorming. List on blackboard all the ways one might come to experience loss. Make list all inclusive: loss from death, divorce, moving, lost goal or ideal, broken friendships.

   After this, list separately all the feelings one might experience as a result of the loss. Again, include as many different feelings: grief, anger, relief, resentment.

   Discuss:
   a) Are you aware of anything new or surprising as a result of writing these lists?

   b) Need loss and strong feelings result from death alone?

   c) Consider the similarities and differences among the losses and feelings mentioned.

   d) What are some of the difficulties in discussing your loss with others (ie. don't want to upset the other, loss seems trivial, suspect others won't understand)

   e) Identify three losses which you personally have experienced. Rank in order of difficulty for you to accept.

   f) Other.

2. Stages of Grieving. Individually, then as a whole group, list all the feelings you had as a result of your most difficult loss. Order them chronologically. Whole group generates a list on the board of the most common feelings.

   Discuss:
   a) How many different feelings did you have listed?

   b) How does you list compare with anyone else's? How does the order of your feelings' appearance compare with anyone else's? If feelings are individual experiences, does it really matter how your feelings compare to others.

   c) How did these feelings influence your attitudes and behaviors toward others and yourself as you were having them?

3. Discuss handout on Stages of Grieving (Table 1)

Discuss:

a) How much of yourself do you invest or commit to a relationship?

b) What are the risks and advantages of a meaningful relationship?

c) Who is responsible for your happiness? What does your answer mean in terms of your deep relationships?

Day 2

4. Studying a Particular Significant Person.

Do the following individually on paper before discussing as a group.

a) Identify a particular individual who made a big difference in your life, past or present, positively or negatively.

b) Write the person's name at the top of the page.

c) List ten characteristics which made that individual's personality unique and which were important factors in your relationship. List positive and negative qualities.

d) Brainstorm many possible personality characteristics on the board, positive and negative, to help the group develop their lists.

e) Place stars (*) next to the top three characteristics which were most important to that person.

f) Place checks ( ) next to the top three characteristics which were most important to you about that person.

Discuss:

1) The difficulty in completing this activity.

2) How many mentioned at least one negative characteristic?

3) How did that person's characteristics affect your relationship with that individual?

4) How are you changed into a more confident and mature individual as a result of knowing that person (list two ways).

5. Unfinished Business. Each member writes these answers individually before sharing with the group.

   a) Think of a person with whom you have/had a relationship and to whom you said or did something you wish you could take back or undo -- or -- to whom you would like to have said or done something to/for but have not been able to.

      Name this person at the top of the page.

   b) Write what you would say or do if you had the opportunity or what you would take back or undo if you had the chance.

   c) Group leader collects all papers. Read anonymously (no names either of writer or of person listed) aloud to the group.

   Discuss: What are the similarities and differences in what you heard about others' unfinished business?

   What keeps you from doing or saying these things in real life?

   What problems do you make for yourself and others when you don't complete such unfinished business?

6. New People Out of Familiar People. Homework.

   Note how people change daily and we often fail to observe these changes. During this week, look for one or two things you previously never noticed about someone who is important to you (ie. how that person smiles, shows appreciation, reacts to frustration). Be willing to share these awarenesses at a future group meeting.

7. Validation. Complete one of the following phrases for someone else in this group and give it him/her when you are finished. Write the note on a piece of paper.

   a) " I learned from you that _____."

   b) " I appreciate you because _____."

   c) " What I will remember most about our experience together is _____."

   Discuss: What is it like for you to do this activity here and now?

   How will this activity affect you relationship with others in this group?

   What keeps you from doing this outside the group?

8. Evaluation. Members complete this brief workshop evaluation and return it immediately to the group facilitator.

Evaluation of LOSS Workshop

1. I found the LOSS Workshop to be interesting.

1	2	3	4	5
very low		medium		very high

2. I learned something important about myself during this workshop.

1	2	3	4	5
very low		medium		very high

3. I learned something about what or who is important to me during this workshop.

1	2	3	4	5
very low		medium		very high

4. I feel more confident about my ability to successfully handle a loss as a result of this workshop.

1	2	3	4	5
very low		medium		very high

5. When I spoke during the workshop, the others seemed to listen and understand what I said and meant.

1	2	3	4	5
very low		medium		very high

6. I would enjoy having similar workshops on different subjects in the future.

1	2	3	4	5
very low		medium		very high

Possible topic for another workshop: _____

7. Write briefly somethin you learned about yourself during these two days:

Stages of Grieving

(Table 1)

Stage	Possible Student Behavior
Numbness	Shock; little talking, blank expression, random physical activity.
Denial	Does not want to discuss loss; Does not want to think about loss; Keeps busy; becomes more of an achiever; Does not feel sad or confused on surface; Refuses to have fun; less eye contact made; Idealizes the lost person; Refuses to become involved with others; Starts arguments with peers.
Bargaining	Behaves and thinks, "AS IF..." such as, "If I do the best job at this activity that I can maybe this loss won't be true or irreversible." "If I act the worst I possibly can, maybe the folks will get back together in order to save me."
Anger	Thinks, "Why me?" Blames others unreasonably for own difficulties; Feels resentment toward others, possibly even toward the lost other for leaving the survivor in this awful situation; Act in rude and uncooperative ways with teachers and peers; May experience anger with oneself and begin to appear unkempt or unprepared for class.
Depression	Feels isolated, sad, and empty; Cries frequently; becomes passive and listless; Does little work; insomnia; Silent and withdrawn or speaks incessantly about the loss.
Acceptance	Person does not forget the lost person or relationship but is not longer angry, depressed, or preoccupied with it. The individual may be Living On, Surviving Sadness.

Note: The stages of grieving are considered by many authors and each may name the stages differently. Some stages may overlap or appear in certain individuals in ideosyncratic ways, but commonalities in types of behaviors do exist.

A Loss Program for Teens

Working With Middle School Counselors

Newport News Public Schools

Responses of Children to Death

Age	Responses to Death
under 3 years	Death means separation and abandonment; No concept of time; all loss feels permanent whether permanent or temporary.
3 - 5 years	Ideas of death come from observation and fantasy: Death means no movement; Dead still have qualities as when alive: playing, eating; Death is reversible; Fear the separation from the mothering person rather than death or dying itself.
5 - 10 years	Includes some of the above plus information from adults; Death as final and irreversible; Death as something far away affecting others; Death may be personified as a bogeyman, ghost ; Death may be escaped by hiding or magic formula.
11 years on	Hold views more similar to adult views; Respond emotionally and intellectually; May become philosophically interested in the meaning of death.

Helping Young People Handle Death

Questionnaire

Directions: Answer true or false to each of the following questions:

1. It is best for a parent to tell a dying child the truth about his/her serious illness and possible death.

2. Children usually have more difficulty understanding and accepting death, including their own, than do their parents.

3. Parents must help the dying person express all emotions, positive and negative, about dying.

4. A dying person should be hospitalized or at least given restricted activities.

5. If a child is seriously ill or dying, adults should be more lax in their behavioral and academic standards for this child than they were before the illnes' onset.

6. Children should visit sying relatives or friends in the hospital if they want to.

7. Children as young as 3 should be taken to a funeral or a parent to view the body briefly or be part of the funeral setting for a few minutes if they consent.

8. Children in middle school years should not be told about a suicide as the cause of a death.

9. Children whose parents have committed suicide are more strongly disposed than other children to suicide thoughts and gestures.

10. If a child's pet dies, it's best to get the animal's body out of the house before the child discovers it.

11. Children over age 8 should be part of any decision to euthanize q pet.

12. If the parent is dying, he should not tell his/her children and prevent their needless worrying.

Task: Telling a Student About a Death During School Hours

Situation: A father calls the school and tells the secretary answering the phone that the mother has been hit by a car on her way to the grocery store. She is in the hospital in critical condition. Aunt Jane will pick up Ann (8th grade) and Henry (9th grade) in 20 minutes. The secretary quickly comes to the Guidance Office and tells you, as the children's counselor. What do you do?

Directions:

List chronologically what you will do.

Consider and answer:

Who do you tell?

What do you tell?

Where do you tell it?

What do the teachers and classes hear from you?

Do you tell the children separately or together?

Do you leave the children alone or stay with them?

What types of comfort or support do you offer?

Do you encourage silence or expression of feelings? How?

Do you offer physical contact or stay at a distance?

Other?

Personal Awareness of Death - Teachers

Discussing loss is an affective subject, and adults need to first accept the content and feelings aroused by this topic. It is important for them to look at the pain again to check that nothing is hidden which might affect their teaching. If the adults have not personally experience a serious loss, they can learn from others how it feels and the thoughts it arouses so they can better help their students deal with similar thoughts and feelings.

Activities:

1. Write a brief essay on the death of someone very important in your life. Describe how you felt, what you did, how you reacted to those around you, from first learning the news through the first three months afterwards.

   Share answers with the group.

   Optional: facilitator collects all essays and reads anonymously

   Discuss: similarities and differences, range of feelings expressed, strong feels occuring in the present by discussing death and the implications for working with children about this topic, how listening to others' narratives influence your thoughts and feelings about your own situation and about the other group members.

2. Discuss: How do I feel about expressing my emotions in the group or a classroom? How do I feel about having my student(s) express strong emotions in class?

3. Discuss: Why should parents want children to learn about death and other loss in school? Why might parents resent such a program? How do we present and justify a loss program to the community?

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